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Womanism and Snowball Sampling: Engaging Marginalized Populations in Holistic Research

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Abstract

Womanist and feminist qualitative researchers continue to identify research methods and techniques that harness the power of social networking and personal connections while engaging with marginalized populations. Many have found that the use of snowball sampling allows increased access to individuals and groups that may otherwise remain inaccessible. The purpose of this article is to discuss the use of snowball sampling techniques within womanist and feminist research. The authors offer critical reflections of the use of this sampling technique as a tool that allows researchers access to “hidden” and marginalized populations. An example of the use of snowball sampling in a doctoral research project, which looks at the experiences of Black women faculty in New Mexico’s institutions of higher education, is provided. The article concludes with recommended strategies and key considerations about the use of snowball sampling in womanist research.

Keywords

Womanist Theory, Qualitative Research, Snowball Sampling, Hidden and Marginalized Populations

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Womanism and Snowball Sampling: Engaging Marginalized Populations in Holistic Research

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Womanist and feminist qualitative researchers continue to identify research methods and techniques that harness the power of social networking and personal connections while engaging with marginalized populations. Many have found that the use of snowball sampling allows increased access to individuals and groups that may otherwise remain inaccessible. The purpose of this article is to discuss the use of snowball sampling techniques within womanist and feminist research. The authors offer critical reflections of the use of this sampling technique as a tool that allows researchers access to “hidden” and marginalized populations. An example of the use of snowball sampling in a doctoral research project, which looks at the experiences of Black women faculty in New Mexico’s institutions of higher education, is provided. The article concludes with recommended strategies and key considerations about the use of snowball sampling in womanist research. Keywords: Womanist Theory, Qualitative Research, Snowball Sampling, Hidden and Marginalized Populations

There exists a need for research methods that assist researchers in engaging with marginalized groups in ways that are more natural and holistic for the members of those groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Vaz, 1997). Robert Guthrie (2004) in his book, *Even the Rat Was White: The History of Psychology*, provides a review of the historical research in the field of psychology in which he points to the inherent racial bias that privileged the White male experience in most of the psychological research. Guthrie’s analysis showed that the White experience was valued and accepted as the normal standard, thus marginalizing and labeling as abnormal any experience that did not adhere to White standards. This type of privileging of the White experience in research is not limited to psychology. Many social justice researchers, with theoretical groundings in womanist, feminist and critical race traditions, have criticized “the existing literature for its lack of attention to the needs and issues of populations currently marginalized in society” due to a failure to recognize the intersection of identity factors such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation and religion (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013, pp. 69-70). An Anglocentric approach neglects to take into account the methods that feel most natural to women, people of color, and other marginalized populations. (Borum, 2005; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Taylor, 1998; Vaz 1997). A critique of such limited research practices has led many scholars to begin inquiries into systemic practices of inequality and oppression even within the research methods themselves (Lyons & Bike, 2013; Stanley, 2013). And “from these critiques has emerged a greater scholarly focus on investigating the effects of systematic forms of inequity and oppression, and a concurrent desire to empower marginalized groups through socially just research practices” (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013, p. 69-70).

Qualitative research methods provide for more opportunities to engage with marginalized groups in holistic research than do quantitative methods (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Lindsay-Dennis, 2011; Miller & Treitel, 1991). Black womanist researchers, whose research is rooted in Black womanist and feminist praxis, utilize research methods like “storytelling, narrative, voice, autoethnography, and phenomenology” to enable the creation of

“a theoretical and methodological space for traditionally silenced and marginalized groups to critique social institutions that perpetuate inequality” (Pratt-Clarke, 2012, p. 84). Within the qualitative toolbox, snowball sampling provides one such way for researchers to study marginalized populations by harnessing the power of social networking and personal connections, which allows for the more thorough analysis of individuals and groups that may otherwise remain inaccessible.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the existing literature about the use of snowball sampling in qualitative research studies that seek to understand the experiences of marginalized groups. The article begins with a review of the history of snowball sampling followed by a discussion of snowball sampling as it pertains to qualitative research methods. Next, an example is provided of a particular womanist research study, conducted by one of the article authors, that employed snowball sampling techniques. Finally, the article concludes with critical reflections of the use of this sampling technique as a tool to access “hidden” and marginalized populations.

The History of Snowball Sampling

Traditionally, snowball sampling has been employed as a “solution to overcome problems of data sampling in the study of hidden populations” (as cited in Faugier & Sargeant, 1997, p. 792). This strategy has been used since 1958 (Coleman). But despite its role in qualitative research and its continued use, there has been a general lack of description of the work involved in snowball sampling—a lack that “led to the impression that all that was required to sample difficult-to-reach populations was to start the ball rolling with one contact, then sit back and watch the sample pile up” (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997, p. 792). This lack of explanation and attention additionally led to a general dismissal of the strategy as unscientific or at the very least problematic. In fact, snowball sampling “has traditionally been sidelined in social research because it does not adhere to many of the notions underpinning conventional random methods of data collection” (Dawood, 2008, pp. 36-37). However, more and more researchers have been detailing their experiences with snowball sampling, demystifying the strategy and shedding light on both its successes and its shortcomings.

Along with the lack of explicit detail surrounding researchers’ uses of snowball sampling, there has also been some disagreement regarding how one is to define “snowball sampling.” Two main definitions of snowball sampling have emerged. In the first, snowball sampling is a term used to describe the researchers’ attempt to study network structure (Heckathorn, 2011). In this definition, “individuals in the sample are asked to identify other individuals, for a fixed number of stages, for the purpose of estimating the number of *mutual relationships* or *social circles* in the population” (Thompson, 2002, p. 183). This version of snowball sampling is defined by Goodman (1961) as “a rigorous statistical approach to estimating certain relational features” (Handcock & Gile, 2011, p. 368). In the second and more current definition, snowball sampling has come to refer to a type of “convenience sampling” especially in regard to hidden populations, hard to reach populations, and sensitive subjects (Heckathorn, 2011, p. 357). This definition involves “collecting a sample from a population in which a standard sampling approach is either impossible or prohibitively expensive, for the purpose of studying characteristics of individuals in the population” (Handcock & Gile, 2011, pp. 368-369). We will be discussing snowball sampling in terms of the second definition in which “a few identified members of a rare population are asked to identify other members of the population, those so identified are asked to identify others, and so on, for the purpose of obtaining a nonprobability sample or for constructing a frame from which to sample” (Thompson, 2002, p. 183).

The problem of interpretation seems to be the least of the complications associated with snowball sampling. Cohen and Arieli (2011) detail the work done by Valdez and Kaplan (1999) and Moore and Hagedorn (2001) in which the authors point to “representativity [as] the central limitation” of snowball sampling (p. 428). Not unjustifiably, this strategy has been criticized for numerous deficiencies, all of which fall under this problem of representativity. In particular, three main issues surface in the literature pertaining to snowball sampling: selection bias, diversity of subjects, and validity. In regard to bias, the main complaint is that because the subjects are hand-chosen by individuals, there can be no “guarantee that the sample will be representative”; in other words, “because samples are not randomly drawn but are dependent on subjective choices of the first contact, samples may then tend towards a reflexive bias” (Dawood, 2008, p. 37). Those subjects who are the first contacts are referred to as the gatekeepers, also called “go-betweens: those who are in the position to facilitate contact between the researcher and potential respondents” (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 428). And these gatekeepers can potentially select respondents based on their own personal biases (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Groger, Mayberry, & Straker, 1999).

In the second problem regarding selection and diversity of subjects, we find that snowball sampling is criticized for being limited to “existing networks” of hidden, hard-to-reach, or sensitive populations. Therefore, instead of being able to choose from “sizeable numbers” of respondents “from a diversity of ethnic, class, and geographical backgrounds,” researchers are forced to sample only “those within particular social milieus” (McCormack, 2014, p. 477). With such limitations concerning subject selection and diversity, it is no wonder that the generalizability of the results of research using snowball sampling has been called into question. Furthermore, Baltar and Brunet (2012) regret that “although initial seeds in snowball sampling are in theory randomly chosen, it is difficult to carry out in practice,” making researching such populations something of a catch 22—hidden, marginalized, or hard-to-reach populations are defined by the very aspects that make the study of them non-generalizable and, to some, invalid (p. 60).

The third problem, that of validity, is another issue that researchers employing snowball sampling struggle to overcome (Baltar & Brunet, 2012; Cohen & Arieli, 2011). So it is not without risk that researchers make use of snowball sampling as a way to gain a better understanding of populations that are not easily accessible. Perhaps, though, it is due to the unique needs and struggles of hidden, hard-to-reach, and sensitive subject populations that social justice researchers continue to use snowball sampling as a means of collecting “cultural knowledge . . . gleaned from anecdotal, observational, experiential, and narrative data” despite the fact that it “often lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the academy” (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013, p. 73). In the end, in order to address the needs of those individuals and groups who are oppressed or marginalized, social justice researchers have a responsibility to consider using strategies such as snowball sampling because perhaps “biased information is better than none” (Sydor, 2013, p. 36).

To further the idea that social justice—and in particular womanist, feminist, and multicultural—researchers must “find ways to frame scientific study in a way that legitimizes cultural knowledge,” we propose that there is a critical need for the use of strategies such as snowball sampling in qualitative research despite the above-listed weaknesses (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013, p. 73). We argue that the womanist, feminist, and multicultural researcher must strive to recognize “the diversity of experiences of girls/women within formerly colonised and historically marginalised societies, their struggles, negotiations and resistance to different forms of patriarchal oppression and domination as well as imperial domination,” and that in order to do so, we must adopt research strategies that are accepted by and comfortable for the subjects being studied (Chilisa & Nteane, 2010, p. 618). For whatever its deficiencies, snowball

sampling provides womanist, feminist, and multicultural scholars a way to use social networking to study marginalized populations without further marginalizing them.

Qualitative Research Methods: Holistic Methods for Research

As a whole, qualitative research allows participant voices to be heard in a more holistic and natural way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Foster-Williamson, 2002; Sosulski, Buchanan, & Donnell, 2010; Vaz, 1997). Gynocentric qualitative research methods have had a profound impact on the research of, for, and about women. The research done by Black Feminist and Black Womanist researchers like Annette Henry (1992), Lisa Paler Hargrove (1999), Joanne Banks-Wallace (2000), Queen Foster-Williamson (2002), and Gloria Hajat (2010) have added to the existing research on Black women's experiences while strengthening the case for the use of qualitative research methods when engaging Black women in research. Qualitative research methods provide three opportunities that quantitative methods do not.

First, qualitative methods allow participant life stories to be told in their own voices and on their own terms, thus creating spaces for marginalized voices to be heard (Adams, 2009; Araujo, 2006; Foster-Williamson, 2002; Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008; Perkins, 2004). bell hooks (1993), in her book *Sisters of the Yam*, writes about the healing power that comes from a Black woman's ability to name and to speak her own truth: "Their healing power can be felt in black women's lives if we dare to look at ourselves, our lives, our experiences and then, without shame, courageously name what we see" (p. 30). The use of qualitative research methods provided the participants in this study the venue to speak about their experiences as Black Women academics in ways that quantitative research methods would not provide. Although the research Sosulski, Buchanan, and Donnell (2010) focused on in the life histories of Black women with severe mental illnesses, they articulated well the reason for using qualitative methods in the holistic understanding Black women's experiences. "Life history methods and feminist narrative analysis techniques," they write, "can be used to reach beyond pathologized conceptions of identity . . . These interpretive methods help to holistically describe the study participants' experiences—both beneficial and harmful—and identify the strategies they use to pursue their goals and enhance their lives" (Sosulski, Buchanan, & Donnell, 2010, p. 30).

Second, Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that "qualitative methods come more easily to hand when the instrument is a human being" by arguing that "normal human activities: looking, listening, speaking, reading, and the like" mean that humans "tend, therefore, toward interviewing, observing, mining available documents and records" (p. 199). Likewise, Heath (2006) argued that qualitative research grounded in Womanist Theory "embodies the art of participatory witnessing (Black women telling their stories)" (p.160). Qualitative techniques like semi-structured interviewing "introduce the opportunity to collect rich data textured by the respondents' own interpretations of their experiences and the social circumstances in which their story has unfolded" (Sosulski et al., 2010, p. 37). Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to listen to the stories of these women and, thus, "learn new ways of being moral and political in the social world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 20).

Third, the use of qualitative methods is consistent with a Womanist research framework and a critical theoretical framework, which takes "a stance toward the nature of reality (ontology), how the researcher knows what she or he knows (epistemology), the role of values in the research (axiology), the language of research (rhetoric), and the methods used in the process (methodology)" (Creswell, 2007, p. 16). According to Coker, Hsin-Hsin, and Kashubeck-West (2009), "researchers should use culturally sensitive research methods: for example, qualitative methods such as interviews, participant observations, and narrative methods when working with African American women (Tillman, 2006; Vaz, 1997)" (p. 162).

Finally, the methods used in the selection of research participants is also important when doing research with African American women and other hidden populations. This is where snowball sampling becomes an ideal method for womanist, feminist, and multicultural researchers. Womanist, feminist, and multicultural researchers use snowball sampling as a means to “partake in the dynamics of natural and organic social networks” as they identify participants for their studies (Noy, 2008, p. 329). Snowball sampling becomes an important tool in accessing those populations that may be hidden or hard to access due to discrimination or other forms of invalidation from the larger society (Browne, 2005; Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010).

Snowball Sampling in a Recent Womanist Research Study

One such hidden population is Black women faculty located in the State of New Mexico. Dr. Xeturah Woodley, co-author of this article, conducted a qualitative research study that sought to understand the experiences of Black women educators in New Mexico’s higher education. At the time of the study, African Americans accounted for 1.9% of the total population in New Mexico (citation needed). It was anticipated that the numbers of Black women educators in higher education institutions would be small based on the overall population demographics of Blacks in New Mexico as well as the historically small numbers of Black faculty in higher education in general.

For the study, the Black women faculty that would be eligible to participate had to meet the following requirements:

1. Participants had to *self-identify* as Black or African American women.
2. Participants had to currently work as a full-time or part-time faculty members at a New Mexico institution of higher education.
3. Participants had to be at least 18 years of age and hold a master’s, Ph.D., or terminal degree in their field.

As she began her research, Woodley was only able to initially identify two (2) Black women faculty, based on previous interactions, that met the criteria. When she contacted these two Black women educators about participating in the study, only one agreed to participate. When Woodley asked if either woman knew of other Black women faculty, they each referred to the other. Rachel, one of the study participants, spoke to the void of Black women faculty on campuses by stating, “I think that it’s really difficult because there are so few African American women in higher education and really no matter what institution you go to” (as cited in Woodley, 2014, p. 149). The limited numbers of Black women educators in both the full-time and part-time ranks reinforces the sense of isolation for this hidden population of educator.

Initially, Woodley began announcing the study and asking for referrals at predominantly Black churches and at meetings of historically Black organizations throughout the State. However, these community announcement efforts were only able to produce a few potential participants. While at an appointment with her hairdresser, Woodley shared about the limited numbers of Black women educators she was able to identify. As she recalls, the hairdresser asked about the criteria and, after hearing all three, was able to immediately identify potential participants. Within the Black community, hair salons and barbershops become “discursive spaces in which the confluence of Black hair care, for and by Black people, and small talk establish a context for cultural exchange” (Alexander, 2003, p. 105). Within these spaces, Black hairdressers carry a great deal of cultural capital as they engage with Black women about their lived experiences. Even within small, isolated Black communities, Black women’s salons are a gathering place and a central hub of community activity. So it only made

sense that one of the most naturalistic locations for identifying participants would be through a hairdresser within the Black community in New Mexico. Referrals from this one hairdresser began a snowball of referral that led to three (3) out of ten (10), or 30%, of the study participants.

Another significant source of referral was from a Hispanic male colleague, whose coalition building at one New Mexico institution, proved to be a great resource for identifying potential participants. During a meeting with a Hispanic male colleague, who worked as a faculty member at an institution in New Mexico, Woodley shared about her research and asked if he knew of any Black women educators that fit the participant criteria. Initially, he was able to provide the name of one potential participant based on a cross-cultural alliance that was built among a number of marginalized groups at the institution. Based on his description of group activities, it appeared as though the group served as both a professional and personal support group that equipped members with tools they needed to combat the systemic racism and inherent biases they experienced at the institution. Cross-cultural alliance building becomes a vital part of institutional survival for many faculty of color at many predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Turner & Myer, 2000). It is through these alliances that many Black women faculty, and other faculty of color, find instruction on how to navigate racism, sexism and other systems of oppression at PWIs. These coalitions become vital to not only surviving but also for retaining within institutions. As the conversation proceeded about the importance of research that provides an opportunity to hear the stories of non-majoritarian groups, he was able to recall the names of two other potential participants for the study.

As the above examples illustrate, snowball sampling was a vital part of identifying Black women educators in New Mexico. By eliciting input from a Black hairstylist, who is the holder of much cultural capital within the Black community, as well as a cross-cultural activist, who had built alliances with Black women educators, 15 potential participants were identified. Ten (10) agreed to participate in the study.

Conclusion

This article has labeled the shortcomings of snowball sampling as selection bias, diversity of subjects, and validity. However, we feel as Foote Whyte (1982) does in that we must “recogniz[e] the personal bias and distortion inherent in snowball sampling as a price which must be paid in order to gain an understanding of these hidden populations and their particular circumstances” and that “the confidence that develops in a relationship over a period of time is perhaps the best guarantee of sincerity . . . and should increase the validity of the data” (as cited in Faugier & Sargeant, 1997, p. 796). Generally, “scientific control trials are not a feasible alternative and no census-based sampling frame nor any other reliable source is available to define and randomly sample these populations”; therefore, womanist and social justice researchers seek to employ methods such as snowball sampling despite their potential shortcomings (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997, p. 790). In short, snowball sampling “allows for the sampling of natural interactional units” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141) while simultaneously “provid[ing] maximum theoretical understanding of a social process” (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997, p. 791). Without snowball sampling, the research detailed in this article would not have been possible.

Our research details the process Woodley undertook in order to locate Black women faculty in New Mexico. Snowball sampling was the way in which she was able to gain access to the subjects in a non-intrusive manner. Thanks to the hairdresser, who acted as an “Intermediar[y] who introduc[e]d the researcher to respondents,” Woodley was able to collect and analyze the narratives of a hard-to-reach population (Dawood, 2008, p. 36). Any researcher invested in studying women and people of color are likewise challenged to employ a method

of study that takes into account the well-being of the subjects, ensuring that these populations are comfortable sharing their experiences without the threat of further marginalization. Because “the focus of qualitative research [is] on contextual meaning and lived experience,” the *method* in which subjects are found, contacted, and studied plays a fundamental role in understanding those lived experiences (McCormack, 2014, p. 475). Therefore, in the light of social justice research and the efforts of womanist, feminist, and multicultural scholars, snowball sampling becomes a critical method of inquiry into hidden, hard-to-reach, and sensitive populations. Moreover, this method’s ability to transcend traditional Anglo-American research methods that potentially alienate minorities and sensitive groups means that researchers are able to study delicate “cultures and lived experiences [in order] to produce knowledge that is contextually relevant, builds relationships, heals the self, the community and the larger socio-cultural context” (Chilisa & Nteane, 2010, p. 619). We see snowball sampling as a way in which to provide a more comfortable research environment for subjects precisely because it “directly addresses the fears and mistrust . . . and increases the likelihood of trusting the researcher by introduction through a trusted social network” (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 423). This social network is essential for womanist researchers in gaining access to their subjects while simultaneously securing their trust.

In addition to providing a comfortable and trusted means of valuing hidden, hard-to-reach, and sensitive populations, snowball sampling also becomes a method through which counter narratives can be told. Authors Chilisa and Nteane (2010) urge scholars “to employ theoretical frameworks that are eclectic and combine theories and techniques from disparate disciplines and paradigms“ in order to offer new ways of “re-read[ing]” the world (p. 620). Snowball sampling offers one such way of rereading the world and validating diverse critical narratives.

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